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ABSTRACT

In the wake of a debate about multiculturalism on college campuses, about one-third of the humanities faculty at Valencia Community College (VCC), in Florida, volunteered to revise the traditional eurocentric curriculum to render it more inclusive and multicultural in nature. Early in the process, faculty identified and evaluated institutional and personal assumptions, biases, and values, and formed guiding principles for curriculum revision by consensus. Though some VCC faculty saw no need to revise the curriculum, those participating in the revision felt that multiculturalism is not a passing political trend, but rather a reflection of an emerging world community which will require its members to navigate differences. As the word "multiculturalism" is politically charged, the faculty members began by agreeing on what multiculturalism does not denote; e.g., an abandonment of the basics or a lowering of standards and requirements; a right- or left-wing personal political agenda; a rigid doctrine of "political correctness"; fixed allegiance to traditional curriculum content or methods; blanket approval of the values or behaviors of all cultures; or a return to "internationalism." The faculty defined their approach to multiculturalism as an intent to include previously excluded groups in curriculum content and teaching methods; to make cultural stories as complete as possible; to recognize academic integrity; and to reflect the cultural and ethnic composition of the student population. An example of a study unit, entitled "1492," which requires students to study and describe the culture of Native Americans pre- and post-colonization by Europeans, is provided. (ECC)

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Teaching A Multicultural Humanities Curriculum In The "P.C." Era

by

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SYNOPSIS

"Teaching a Multicultural Humanities
Curriculum in the 'P.C.' Era"

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Instructors who volunteered to revise a traditional eurocentric Humanities curriculum to render it more multicultural in nature agreed on the following premises to guide their revision process:

Why Revise a Traditional Curriculum?

* Multiculturalism is not a passing political trend, but rather the reflection of an emerging world community which will require its participants to "navigate difference" (Robert Hughes).

What is NOT meant by "Multiculturalism"

* abandoning the "basics" or lowering standards and requirements in reading and writing
* pushing a right or left personal political agenda
* being tied to "Political Correctness" as a rigid doctrine
* continuing the heritage of how we were taught as the sacred liturgy and text to be transmitted to the next generation
* approving the values or behaviors of all cultures
* returning to the good old days of "internationalism"

What IS Meant by "Multiculturalism"

* the intent to include previously excluded groups in both the curriculum content and teaching methodologies (oral story telling, dance, music)
* the effort to make cultural stories as complete as possible
* a recognition of academic integrity
* a reflection of the composition of community college student populations

If multicultural curricula can in any way increase students' knowledge, skills and empathy as educated persons and better prepare them for their immanent future, then we should consider making the necessary changes. Given the morning and evening news headlines, whatever might enhance, rather than destroy, our living together peacefully in this country and in this shrinking world deserves a sincere effort.

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Teaching a Multicultural Humanities Curriculum in the 'P.C.' Era

A Revision Process and Its Rationale

In the wake of the debate on multiculturalism on college campuses, about one third of the instructors in the humanities department at Valencia Community College volunteered to revise a traditional eurocentric curriculum to a more multicultural one. Given the eurocentric structural bias established in our state approved humanities curriculum, the process of rendering the curriculum less eurocentric forced us to address institutional and personal assumptions, biases and values. The curriculum is designed to reflect the time and cultural periods traditionally assigned to Western European culture: Ancient Greece and Rome; Early Roman Empire and the Middle Ages; Renaissance and Baroque; Enlightenment and Romanticism. Two of our courses do not bear such a designation: the Twentieth Century and Introduction to the Humanities. We decided to begin the revision with the Middle Ages and then proceed to the Renaissance and through the later time periods. As coordinator of the process I participated in all of the discussions and debates relating to the assumptions, biases and values upon which we had to reach a consensus.

As we began our discussions, we realized that inherent in the concept of a multicultural humanities curriculum are a number of value biases which might best be flushed out and addressed directly. Such include why a multicultural approach should be used in a humanities curriculum; what is meant and what is not meant by "multiculturalism"; and how to go about reforming an existing, traditional curriculum. Perhaps our experiences and the consensus that we reached on these issues in our local process and efforts can be of assistance to others who wish to undertake a similar task.

Why Revise a Traditional Curriculum?

The issue of "Political Correctness" (PC) quickly reared its head in our discussions on content, language and the teaching-learning processes. Very early in our discussions, we realized the struggle ahead. Given the additional work and potential political disputes within the faculty and with students, why do it? As a non-participating faculty member commented, why revise a curriculum

"which ain't broke" to fit a passing trend?

The participants in the revision process do not believe that this current multicultural movement is a passing political trend, and that if we hold our traditional breath long enough, we will get back to normal. Robert Hughes voiced our perception of this movement in his essay, "The Fraying of America" (Time, February 3, 1992, pp. 44-49).

> "To put the argument for multiculturalism in merely practical terms of self-interest: though elites are never going to go away, the composition of those elites is not necessarily static. The future of American ones, in a globalized economy without a cold war, will rest with people who can think and act with informed grace across ethnic, cultural, linguistic lines. And the first step in becoming such a person lies in acknowledging that we are not one big world family, or ever likely to be; that the differences among races, nations, cultures and their various histories are at least as profound and as durable as the similarities; that these differences are not deviations from a European norm but structures eminently worth knowing about for their own sake. In the world that is coming, if you can't navigate difference, you've had it."

As educators, he is warning us that we are not meeting the real needs of our students if we are not preparing them to have the knowledge, skills and empathies necessary to function in a world culture. Multiculturalism is not a political trend that will pass; it is our immanent future.

This poses a particular challenge for us as professors. Most of us as students, had been taught traditional, eurocentric curricula. We are not all equally equipped to teach the cultural contributions of women, peoples in and out of Africa, Hispanic speaking cultures, and Native American peoples. We have a considerable amount of learning to do ourselves before we can teach our students differently. Not only are many of us intellectually unequipped to teach a multicultural curriculum, our attitudes may be resistant to learning and teaching such a curriculum. The truth is, we can revise our curricula until doomsday; unless teachers are willing to teach non-traditional content and methods, the multicultural curriculum will lie in files or on book shelves gathering academic dust and never be implemented in the teaching-learning process. This perception was behind our rationale to begin the revision process with volunteers who would report to the faculty as a whole on progress made and on new information and materials available for faculty use. It was most helpful to the revision process to listen to the non participating faculty comment on why they were not interested in joining us in the revision. However, many of their perceptions and fears were voiced in our revision process discussions by participating members. One of the first points on which we had to come to some agreement was what we do <u>not</u> mean by "multiculturalism".

What We Do NOT Mean By "Multiculturalism"

It is not possible to utter the word "multiculturalism" in an academic setting (including staff lounges and conference restrooms) without provoking a heated debate. Clearly, this word has taken on disparate meanings to different groups and seems to be irrevocably mired in both left and right political persuasions. Given this highly political overtone, we found it easiest to first agree on what we did not mean by multiculturalism. By advocating a multicultural humanities curriculum we agreed that we do not mean the following:

1) abandoning the "basics" or lowering standards and requirements in reading and writing

This was a particularly important issue for our faculty since the humanities courses being revised are 6,000 word writing classes which fall under the Florida law called the "Gordon Rule." This law requires that each student write a minimum of 24,000 evaluated words before graduation. We eventually agreed that it is possible to keep strict academic standards for literacy and include new content and information areas on which students can write, deliver speeches, prepare reports or even paint and compose. We also agreed that adding the art and skill of story telling to our teaching-learning strategies could enhance oral-aural skills which reinforce communication skills objectives. Clearly, it is not necessary to abandon literacy skills even in studying pre or non literate societies. All cultures and groups offer opportunities to acquire or reinforce communication, thinking and creativity skills. Exposing students to content and processes with which they are unfamiliar provides even more opportunities for acquiring such skills.

2) pushing a right or left personal political agenda

While this is a difficult premise to implement, we agreed as a faculty that multiculturalism was not meant to be used as an institutional platform for advocating a personal political agenda on either end of the spectrum. We are not proposing that we maintain moral or intellectual "neutrality" in teaching, but rather, to play advocate from as many sides of an issue or event as possible. As teachers, we, too, can learn by taking an advocacy position for a belief or action with which we disagree. But we must not lose sight of the fact that as professors, our responsibility and focus for teaching is to enhance student thinking and communication skills, not to promote our own personal agenda. I consistently receive feedback from my students who want to know where I really stand on issues, beliefs or even religions, because I take so many different sides on issues in order to prod critical thinking and new insight on their part.

3) being tied to "Political Correctness" as a rigid doctrine

We agreed that there is intellectual and ethical risk in refusing to use certain words or to point out and discuss concepts and practices that may place a given group in less that ideal light or cause some students discomfort. Much of the political correctness movement seems spurred on by a very real historical lack of respect for certain groups of people or a lack of completeness in relating historical events. Not telling the whole story shows disrespect by omission. We agreed that the reason behind the "PC" movement is valid, but a rigid or extreme position on "correctness" risks superficiality and superciliousness and can not be allowed to dictate curriculum or class discussion. Intellectual rigor and honesty requires a discussion of diverse viewpoints without casting one group as the historical and contemporary arch villain.

We are not advocating being disrespectful to any group; rather we want to maintain a respectful attitude in discussing subjects that may be offensive to some people. For example, in a Religious Traditions course, two half-brothers from Saudi-Arabia, practicing Muslims, were in the class with other students of Judeo-Christian heritage. About a week before we were to begin our study of the religion of Islam I asked the brothers to stay after class to speak to them privately. I explained that I wanted to teach the religion of Islam in the same way that I had taught the other religions: by creating its relationship to culture and by overtly discussing American stereotypes of the people who practice this religion. Once students feel comfortable and know that it is safe to be honest, they often admit their biases toward certain groups. This openness allows a discussion of stereotypes and how and why we have them. I warned the Saudi brothers what they might hear about Arabs and Muslims and asked that they not take it personally, but rather allow the other students to be honest. This honest discussion of stereotypes could open the door to receiving more complete information. Their response was simply, "No problem. We've heard it all before anyway". Having a sense of humor and a great deal of charm, they were an enormous resource to teaching that particular unit. The non-Muslim students had an educational experience unavailable from a textbook or lecture by giving voice to their stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims and by interacting with two people who did not meet those expectations. As the Murphy Brown Show so humorously made the point in the October 11, 1993 episode, it is not possible to talk about anyone without offending someone.

Some campuses may have more problems and sensitivity with students voicing politically incorrect beliefs and words than our campus, but we strongly believe that rigorous education and free speech can not be denied for fear of offending a particular person or group. A politically correct posture taken to a certain level risks becoming anti-intellectual, counterproductive to mutual understanding, and risks reinforcing the very prejudice it claims to be against. We can not force openness or tolerance on others, much less acceptance or admiration. However, what goes

"underground" in our beliefs and fears, what we repress and keep in the dark, remains unaffected by enlightenment or greater understanding. Our function should not be to police words or prejudice in the classroom, but to pursue it verbally to find its source in personal experience, in family systems or in societal culture. We don't have to agree with, like, or admire all peoples, cultures or even each other. However, how we disagree with or question each other does have bearing on the issue of effective learning in the classroom.

I have attempted to address the issue of personal and group respect by inserting a special rules section in each syllabus which states that all students will speak and act respectfully toward the professor and each other. We are allowed to disagree with each other, but in a respectful manner. I do sometimes have to play referee, but as a general operating rule, it has worked well. Students tell me that they learn a great deal through honest communication in an open, safe environment. The process of listening, discussing, disagreeing, supporting or not supporting perceptions and assumptions teaches not only intellectual skills and enlightenment, but social and interpersonal skills. Such discussion exposes students to personal interaction with those who are different from them, an opportunity which many of them may not have outside of the classroom. This type of process can play a role in nurturing students to become more adult. Personally, I believe that one of my major roles as a professor of these students is not only to teach them content information, but to guide the development of social skills and maturity level.

4) continuing the heritage of how we were taught as the sacred liturgy and text to be transmitted to the next generation

We had to decide that there were no sacred cows of traditional academic content and process that could not be open to reexamination. Change, especially substantive change, can be very frightening to those who are used to doing something a certain way and to those who sincerely believe that their method and content is the True Way. We opted for diverse "truths" as experienced by given viewpoints in a certain time for a specific event. All content and all methods are open to questioning and change. Of course, nitty comes to gritty when it is my beloved unit that is being put on the changing block. It is true that we can not teach everything, nor can we keep adding new content in the always too brief time allotment. Some content must be eliminated if new information is to be added and that precipitates some difficult decision making. In the Renaissance course, I chose to eliminate the Northern Dutch painters and to greatly shorten the Baroque unit in order to add a unit which I created entitled "1492". In that unit students research pre and post Columbian Native American peoples and the primary European players in the Age of Discovery. This is not an anti-art or anti-Dutch painting posture on my part. My Renaissance students do an entire unit on early Renaissance art and are required to write an essay on early Renaissance innovations in

painting as illustrated in the frescoes of Masaccio. I simply had to make some difficult choices on which art, art principles and observation skills might be of maximum benefit to them at this early undergraduate level.

5) approving the values or behaviors of all cultures

We do not view multiculturalism as the blanket approval of all beliefs and behaviors of all non dead, white, upper class, European males. While teaching the culture of the Aztecs, we relate a complete cultural story by including their religious practice of human sacrifice and cannibalism. While we do not want to advocate this practice as worthy of reintroduction into our time and culture, we can present this information in such a way as to avoid labeling and condemning the Aztecs as "savages". Our aim is to understand the meaning of such practices to the Aztecs within their time and culture. If a professor's goal is the development of student knowledge and understanding, then subjects and viewpoints can be discussed in a way that furthers student intellectual and ethical development. We do this knowing that intellectual and ethical outcomes will be different for different students.

6) returning to the good old days of "internationalism"

Previous to the era of "political correctness" many curricula incorporated the study of "foreign" cultures. Our conceptualization of a multicultural curricula is not really a corrected or updated version of such studies, although there may be similar content. We see an attitudinal and some content differences between "international studies" and multicultural curricula. Just as the Cable News Network has renamed its reporting on world events to the "International Hour", banishing the use of the term "foreign", we believe that seeing those who are different from us as "foreign" probably does not advance cross cultural communication. Also, "inter-national" studies looks to other nations for the studies of diverse cultures. Multiculturalism can look within the United States to understand and appreciate our own cultural differences and heritages.

What We DO Mean by "Multiculturalism"

Ergo, given all that we did not wish to imply or assume by multiculturalism, what conclusion can we reach about its meaning? We reached a consensus on the following assertions to guide us in revising the curriculum:

1) the intent is to include previously excluded groups in both the curriculum content and teaching methodologies (oral story

telling, dance, music)

It is apparent in many recent text revisions that women, people of African descent, Spanish speaking peoples, native American peoples and other groups have indeed made contributions to human culture and had viewpoints on historical events that have not been included in our traditional telling of human cultural history. Our revised content and methods are intended to reflect previously excluded groups' cultures and values to better understand their way of life, their viewpoints and their contributions. With this better understanding, we may agree or disagree with cultural practices, admire or not admire certain peoples. However, as advocates of a multicultural curriculum, we encourage discussion, debate and questioning of diverse viewpoints of human culture and civilization. We believe that any sincere question which is respectfully asked, should be responded to. This may tread on thin politically correct ice, but how else can we achieve communication with each other if we are not allowed respectfully to communicate our thoughts, fears and even our prejudices about those groups who have traditionally been excluded and even about the dominant group? Perhaps we can live in greater peace with each other if we have more understanding of the hows and whys of a group's life and culture.

2) the effort to make cultural stories as complete as possible

The adage that "the victor of the battle writes the history", seems to have merit. Most of my Renaissance students begin the class not understanding the recent controversies over Columbus Day. After the "1492" unit, they do understand and can create a more informed opinion on the merits of various positions. For many years, the complete story of the Age of Exploration and Discovery was not told. There were indeed more viewpoints than that of Columbus or Ferdinand and Isabella. Does this mean that we must present Columbus as the first of the Evil Colonizers? Did the European colonization of the Americas bring only destruction? Much of the current debate seems to insist that Columbus and those who came after him were either devils or heroes. As with most human exploits and institutions, a case can be made that the Discoverers were both heroic and devilish, not simply one or the other. Clearly, the viewpoint of the Aztecs, Incas, and the North American native peoples, is different from that of the conquistadors, so it is important to include their perspective in the story. While Ferdinand and Isabella may be appreciated for their support in making the voyage of Columbus possible, are they equally heroic in the eyes of the thousands of Jews whom they expelled from Catholic Spain at the time of Columbus' voyage? The inclusion of two or three or more viewpoints enhances critical thinking, communication and understanding.

3) a recognition of academic integrity

Another positive motivator for revising to a multicultural curriculum is simply academic integrity, to be as honest as possible in relating cultural stories, events, motivations, outcomes and consequences to policies and actions. While all motivations, behaviors and outcomes remain open to interpretation and debate, we give students more opportunity to form independent opinions and insight by giving more complete information. The principle of academic integrity makes an ethical case for telling such complete stories.

4) a reflection of the composition of community college student populations

More and more, community college populations are becoming ethnically diverse. In our community college, students from Asia sit next to African-Americans and Puerto Ricans who sit near Jamaicans and Saudi-Arabians and fourth generation Irish and Italians. Recognizing the students' cultural heritages and seeing them as resources in the teaching-learning process validates the students themselves and their diverse cultures in each others' eyes. We do not need to like each other. The development of understanding and tolerance would move us forward from our current positions.

If multicultural curricula can in any way increase students' knowledge, skills and empathy as educated persons and better prepare them for their immanent future, then we should consider making the necessary changes. Given the morning and evening news headlines, whatever might enhance, rather than destroy, our living together peacefully in this country and in this shrinking world deserves a sincere effort.

Example
Renaissance and Baroque: "1492" Unit

Even the most recently revised edition of the humanities text which we have used for a number of years does not include material on the Age of Exploration in the Renaissance period. I have created a unit called "1492" which follows a lengthy unit on the economic rise of Florence and the Florentine artistic innovations in sculpture, architecture and painting. The 1492 unit is designed around student research and oral report projects. It begins with a lecture giving an overview of the material to be studied and by distributing a project report sign-up sheet. The topics for the sign-up sheet are North American Indians; the Aztecs; the Incas; Africa in the fifteenth century; the roles of the Portuguese, the Spanish, the French, and the English. For each topic, students are given specific questions to guide them in their research and in creating an oral report on these peoples and their roles in the Age of Discovery.

Students are required to describe the culture of Native Americans pre and post the colonization by Europeans. Questions on native cultures center on social organization, religion, language, relationship to natural environment, arts and crafts, foods, and technology. The use of audio-visual materials is a requirement for the reports. Students are especially amazed at the world wide redistribution of plants, animals and technologies as a direct result of this exploration and colonization. They have brought (Mexican) chocolate, (European) wheat bread and (African) black eyed peas to class as part of their illustration of cultural distribution.

Renaissance & Baroque
"1492"

Early Immigrants to the Americas
- North American Indians
- Aztecs
- Incas

European Explorers & Colonies
- Portuguese
- Spanish
- English
- French

Consequences: Constructive & Destructive
- Native peoples
- European peoples
- Plants, animals & environment
- Technology
- Geography
- Definitions of ethnocentrism, eurocentrism, culture, civilization, global village